Children, Young People, UNICEF and Participation

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ABSTRACT   *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is part of a significant shift in thinking about children, young people and childhood. It has introduced* participation *as the third P, alongside* provision *and* protection. *Development actors and policies have identified participation as a facet of meaningful social development. Academics have constructed new ways of conceptualising children, recognising them as competent social actors and social participants. However, while discourses of participation have reached global scales it is important that we maintain a 'critical eye' on what participation is and whom it is for. Such a critical eye can be cast very effectively over UNICEF's very own discourses and practices.*

KEYWORDS: *Participation, children, young people, Convention on the Rights of the Child, development, UNICEF*

Introduction

'Participation' appears to be *the* word, concept and discourse to engage with when doing research or working with children and young people in the context of development. It is almost held up as the panacea for all the problems young people and children face in the South (and it is gaining precedence in the North too, see Mayo, 2001). However, as with all prevailing and encompassing discourses it is important that it is closely interrogated, unpacked and critiqued. This article contributes to the growing literature which engages with the highly complex and dynamic discourse and practice of children's and young people's participation.

   This paper will initially examine the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which has been identified as the trigger to a revolutionary step in the recognition of children as 'human beings' rather than has 'human becomings' (Kjørholt, 2001, 2004). It will then provide a critical commentary on selected aspects of wider discussions which have contributed to a reconstitution of the concept of childhood, children and social participation. The next part of the article will take one specific published case study through which to explore a particular interpretation of children's and young people's 'participation'; UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2003 (hereafter SOWC) report published in 2002. This allows us to examine the ways in which one of the key initiators and sponsors of the CRC, UNICEF, constructs the concepts of childhood and participation in relation to

social development. Hence it is a way to see a specific part of the UN at work in the way it practices its own doctrine of participation. Throughout the discussion of the SOWC this paper will provide a critical discourse analysis of 'participation' and the construction of 'childhood'

At this stage I wish to clarify this paper's definition of 'children', 'young people' and 'childhood'. It can be quite hard to define children and young people (Skelton, 2000; Weller, 2006). Definitions of who is a child and who might be called a young person often vary over time, space and also within a particular context whether the focus is social, economic, political, legal or cultural. Hence, within the UK children/young people are legally bound to remain in school until they are 16, can work part-time for a number of hours per week from the age of 14, can learn to drive when they are 17 and are entitled to vote when they are 18. Hence different rights are dependent on different ages. There is often far too much emphasis placed on age and yet in most cases this is expedient, even if problematic; age categorisations tend to be used despite their problems. Nevertheless, this can be culturally problematic because different societies have different definitions but these seem to be being eroded by a global definition of 'the child'.[1]

UNESCO (2002) talks of young people being aged 15–24. The UNCRC defines children as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (UN CRC, 1989, Part 1, Article 1). Hence, a particular country can change the definition of child by changing the age of majority—but at this stage children move into the realms of adult rights which are often very different to those afforded children. This definition and the 'magical age of 18' is used to define children and appears, by default to, include young people; certainly within UNICEF and UNESCO definitions. Young people are not very often mentioned *per se* in documentation; indeed, throughout the UNICEF document examined here, the terms 'child' and 'children' are prevalent, 'young people', 'adolescent' are less so. In contrast, in a UNESCO (2002) document the term 'child' is not used even though those under 18 are recognised within the document and according to the CRC are still classified as children. However, if we consider these two international organisations (UNICEF and UNESCO) and the definitions embedded within their documents it can be interpreted from the discourse that 'child' could be a term inclusive of young people. This point is an important one to raise because it illustrates one of the problems of the predominance of discourses on children which do not even mention young people. Young people who do not consider themselves to be children anymore, and are in many ways not perceived as such by wider society, may feel that the rights defined for children do not apply to them. They can be in a kind of limbo between childhood and adulthood (Sibley, 1995). They are certainly rarely mentioned in global and national discourses of 'the child'.[2] Where this article uses the terms 'child' and 'childhood' (because this is the predominant terminology within the UNICEF material under focus) it also includes, and sometimes explicitly names, young people. This is because the author feels it is important that readers are reminded that young people, although in a sort of liminal, inbetween space, play an important role in society and it is important that their presence is included. The concept of 'childhood' is much harder to define, and consequently in the subsequent section of this paper there is a brief discussion, well rehearsed in wider 'childhood' studies, of what are the current perceptions of 'childhood' and how these can be explicitly related to discussions about participation.

Children, Childhood and Participation

The notion of children and young people being encouraged and facilitated to participate in a range of social and cultural contexts and institutions, particularly where these have a

direct impact on their lives, has grown in significance throughout the 1990s (Hart, 1997; Johnson *et al.*, 1998; Matthews *et al.*, 1999; Kjørholt, 2001, 2002, 2004; Auriat *et al.*, 2001; Barrow, 2002; Chawla, 2002b; UNESCO, 2002; Freeman *et al.*, 2003; Kelley, 2006; McNeish and Gill, 2006). Many acknowledge that this focus on participation is strongly connected with the introduction of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (Matthews *et al.*, 1999; Barrow, 2001; Chawla, 2002b; Freeman *et al.*, 2003) The CRC was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 on November 20th, 1989. It came into force on September 2nd in 1990 and has been ratified by all but two countries of the 193 UN member states (those two being Somalia and the USA) throughout the early 1990s. The UK Government signed it in 1991 (Matthews, 2005).

The CRC of 1989 marked a change in approach to the world's children. In 1959, through UNICEF, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child which defined children's rights to protection, education, health care, shelter and good nutrition. Hence, in the early stages, goals tended to be about the practical support and care of children, especially at times of crisis. The emphasis at this time was on provision and protection. The CRC restated the first two 'Ps'—*provision* and *protection* but it also introduced a third 'P'—*participation*. A range of commentators have argued that this has been its most radical contribution and has been part of a paradigmatic shift in thinking about children in global and national contexts (Hammarberg, 1990; Freeman, 1992; Cantwell, 1993; Kjørholt, 2001; Mayo, 2001; Chawla, 2002b). Focusing on children's rights in the Caribbean, Christine Barrow (2002, p. xv) argues:

> The distinguishing feature of the CRC lies in its emphasis on the *participation* of children in decisions affecting their own lives. Previous declarations had adopted a restricted and paternalistic view of children . . . The CRC, in contrast, acknowledges the autonomy of the child and the accompanying principles of social inclusion, self-determination and empowerment.[3]

It is important, in order to demonstrate the significant emphasis placed on participation, that we take a close look at the CRC (and other Agendas and documents) in order to identify the ways in which participation is woven throughout the convention. 'Participation' is not a stand-alone article but is *embedded* within the CRC and, importantly, it is also evident in other international agreements where children *per se* were not necessarily the central focus. Hence the discourse of 'participation' spreads further than the CRC but it is the CRC that clearly defines the importance of children's participation.

The significant articles of the CRC are those from 12.1 to 15.1 (Auriat *et al.*, 2001; Chawla, 2002b). They state that children who are capable of forming their own views should have the right to express them freely in all matters which affect them; that children should have the right to freedom of expression and access to information; that children should have rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; that children should have the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly (UNICEF, 1990). Louise Chawla (2002b, p. 26) argues that there are other articles are relevant to the principle of participation, specifically in relation to the quality of children's environments, namely articles 27, 29, 30 and 31.

In the document '*UNESCO-mainstreaming the needs of youth*' (2002) it is argued that 'the most ardent wish of young people is to *participate*, as full and equal citizens, in today's world' (pp. 2, emphasis in the original). On page 4 the document states: 'Today, the Organization [UNESCO] is mobilizing support from Member States and other partners (non-Governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations and associations) and is moving even further to integrate youth in terms of participation, partnership and

empowerment'. Hence there is an explicit focus on the agents (other than young people themselves) who need to work towards the full participation of young people.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 produced Agenda 21 and a Programme of Action. There was a chapter on children and young people stating that they are a major group who should be part of participatory processes for sustainable development and environmental improvement. Similarly the Habitat Agenda from the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1996 states that governments must utilise participatory approaches which include intergenerational interests relating to sustainable human settlements demanding special attention to children (Chawla, 2002b, p. 27).

Mayo (2001) states that children's participation has entered the mainstream vocabulary of development but that the practice lags behind the rhetoric. She argues that when there is children's participation it is often more about 'tokenism' or 'decoration' (Hart, 1997) and that children's voices are still not being listened to. However, there are clear examples of very effective participation on the part of children evident in the eight country programme *Growing up in Cities* (Chawla, 2002a). Nevertheless, despite the programme's success in children's participation the study 'found a large gap between the rhetoric of international agreements and the reality of authorities' provisions for children' (Chawla, 2002b, p. 31).

Of course the CRC, and its introduction of the concept of participation for children, didn't appear out of a vacuum. There was a range of groups (NGOs, campaigning groups focusing on education, child labour, abuse issues, etc.) who were pushing for participation as a feature of children's rights. In particular countries individual changes to rights legislation for children were being introduced in the late 1980s and throughout the early 1990s. In some cases this was as a response to specific events or practices in which the lack of acceptance of children as being protagonists or as having the right to be listened to had had dire consequences for children. In the UK the 1989 Children's Act of England and Wales was in part a response to a large number of cases of systematic child abuse that had not been properly investigated or dealt with effectively.

Alongside changes in legal and political debates relating to children, and the growing development discourse around participation, there was also a conceptual shift taking place within social studies of childhood and children (James and Prout, 1990; Qvortrup, 1994; James *et al.*, 1998). Over the past 15–20 years there has been a paradigmatic shift in the social studies of childhood which has critically engaged with ideas about what constitutes 'childhood' and which also uses new methodological approaches such as discourse analysis (Kjørholt, 2004). In some ways the new conceptualisations of children and childhood has enabled the more 'practice-based' discussions about participation to emerge.

The 'new' social studies of childhood have been discussed elsewhere within geography (cf. Holloway and Valentine, 2000, for an excellent summary[4]). All I wish to do here is pull out *some* of the key features of this 'new' approach that frames the critical discourse analysis of this particular paper and examine what roles these play in the conceptualisation of participation.

- Childhood is understood to be a social rather than a natural phenomenon. As a social construct it is part of particular social, historical and cultural contexts. Alongside the conceptualisation of gender, childhood is now recognised not to be biologically determined nor a constant. If childhood is a social construction then its meaning and practice can change over time. What childhood has meant to the United Nations has changed over time from the 1959 Declaration through to the CRC of 1989 (as discussed above). The possibility of social change in the conceptualisation of children and young people is one facet that has allowed for the recognition of their participatory potential.

- Children are seen as social actors and agents. This transforms previous conceptualisations which saw children as passive beneficiaries, silent objects of concern who are dependent on adult control and care (Barrow, 2002). It is important to stress here that not all conceptualisations of children have gone through such a transformation. There is still a pervasive perception of children as dependent, in need of protection and unable to adequately articulate their own needs.[5] Children are understood to be competent and so entitled to have the right to participate in society and have a say in issues which affect their lives. They are constructed as 'being' instead of 'becoming' (Qvortrup, 1994, this is a conceptual point that I return to later in the paper).
- There are multiple childhoods which are constructed, in part by children themselves, which are dynamic across time and space. There are therefore different cultural interpretations of childhood but these are currently locked in engagements (even battles) with universalised global discourses on childhood which hold certain principles about children's rights as central. As Jo Boyden points out 'highly selective, stereotyped perceptions of childhood . . . have been exported from the industrial world to the South. They have provided a focal point for the development of both human rights legislation at the international level and social policy at the national level in a wide range of countries' (1990, p. 191). I return to the problems of this 'northern-centrism' in global definitions of childhood later in the paper. What Boyden's work shows very clearly is that while the new social studies of childhood recognise the cultural and spatial differentiations for the meaning of childhood, international agreements appear to be not so well informed.
- If children are seen as competent social actors then they have the right and the ability to act as participants. This is a participation which goes beyond the fact that 'life itself presupposes participation' (Kjørholt, 2004, p. 3). However, in any context, how, where and when children should participate is a cultural construction. Their participation thence constructs a particular social practice which in turn can establish the scale and form of children's participation.

Consequently the recent perspectives on children's participation have emerged from a range of fields: global discourses and conventions; individual countries and state legislative practices; development discourses and actors; academic paradigm shifts; and children and young people themselves.

There are though extensive problematics related to children's participation, some of which this paper illustrates. There are anxieties about whether children's participation can be genuine and effective or rather simply symbolic, a form of window dressing which acts as tokenism or decoration (Hart, 1997). There are serious concerns about what children and young people themselves feel about their participation and whether they are being listened to effectively (Stephens, 1995; Mayo, 2001; Kjørholt, 2002; Percy-Smith, 2002). As Nelson and Wright have argued (1995, p. 2) participation is a 'warmly persuasive word' that 'seems never to be used unfavourably and is never given any positive opposing or distinguishing term'. Much of the discussion and practice of participation is based upon universalised and normative assumptions. There is a universal view of children and childhood (which many argue is a based upon a Northern discourse, Boyden, 1990) and also a presumption of the value of such participation. In view of the predominance of the notion of children's participation, and the fact that it has become a highly persuasive global discourse, it is essential that there is a continual critical interrogation of what it means and whether its practice is beneficial or detrimental for the children involved and children more generally. This article is part of that critical view.

UNICEF

The UN created the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in December 1946. It was specifically set up to help children who were facing famine and disease in Europe after the Second World War. UNICEF then led the way in the establishment of the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child which established the centrality of provision and protection for children. More recently it has been a key protagonist for the writing and signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 and in continuing to ensure the CRC is put into practice. It is a central player in the UN and ensures that children and young people are part of the agenda. An example of this is its instigation of the United Nations' Special Session on Children in May 2002 (New York).

UNICEF is a major player in development which specifically relates to children, families and education (Ansell, 2005). It interacts with, and has to try and counter, some of the most damaging processes connected with globalisation (see Katz, 2004, for an excellent analysis of the role global processes play in children's lives). In addition, it is dedicated to the healthy and sustainable reproduction of future generations. As a global player it structures dominant discourses of the 'global child' and constructs children, young people and childhood in particular ways. Finally, UNICEF, as part of the UN, is committed to the principle of effective democracy and 'authentic participation'.[6] It supports a variety of schemes within nations (as well as regions) that focus on children's participation in democratic processes and consequently contributes to the construction of national childhoods. It can also encourage agenda setting within regions and states (see below in relation to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe).

The CRC has challenged and developed the ways in which development agencies, national governments and NGOs work and 'do' development *to* and/or *with* children.[7] Indeed, UNICEF has a sub-title evident on most of its web pages and reports which reflects its work and goals:

> *For every child*
> *health, education, equality, protection*
> *ADVANCE HUMANITY*

The element of progress and a focus on the future is captured in the word 'advance'. We might critique this as a link with 'modernisation' development theory and the expectation of constant improvement. We could also applaud the sentiment which appears inclusive of everyone and states some of the elements that are essential for child welfare.

Early in the twenty-first century, UNICEF has organised several major global events to raise the profile of children and young people. In 2001 it organised the worldwide campaign '*Say 'Yes' For Children*' beginning in March. Adults and children were asked to make a pledge by saying 'yes' to the following statement: 'I believe that all children should be free to grow in health, peace and dignity'. Ninety-five million pledges (including 20 million from China and 16 million from Turkey) were presented at the Children's Forum in New York in 2002. As part of this campaign children were asked to list three priorities. The top three issues were, education, discrimination and poverty. The Forum then reported to the Special Session (May 2002, see below).

In the 12 months prior to the Special Session for Children of the UN General Assembly (May 2002) 40,000 children aged 9–18 in 72 countries answered a poll about their everyday realities and their hopes for the future. The central thematic was '*a world fit for children*'. These survey data have informed a range of subsequent initiatives, including one by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The OSCE is the largest security organisation in the world and it has asked its field missions to use the survey results 'to

inform and guide their programmes aimed at strengthening democratic citizenship, civic education, conflict prevention and security' (SOWC, 2003, p. 51).

In May 2002 the General Assembly of the UN held a special session on children to exclusively discuss children's issues, for the first time. Also, for the first time, children were included as official delegates representing governments and NGOs. All of these events have a played a role in the UNICEF goal of children's participation which is then summarised in The State of the World's Children 2003 report. The year 2002 was therefore a key time in the history of UNICEF and the UN in their approach towards children and young people. In particular, 2002 can provide an insight into the ways in which UNICEF (and the UN) is putting the CRC understanding of children's participation into practice.

It is clear, therefore, that UNICEF has broadened its scope substantially while keeping the same early goals as part of its *raison d'être*. The centrality of education and nutrition are evident in the list below of the key foci of past 'State of the World's Children' reports. In addition, there are other themes which occupy the time and energy of this vast global organisation which funds, supports and endorses an enormous number of development initiatives both at times of crisis and throughout the more mundane everydayness of life for children and young people.

The State of the World's Children: themes over time

- Children in War 1996
- Child Labour 1997
- Nutrition 1998
- Education 1999
- Generic call to re-affirm promises made to children at the 1990 World Summit for Children 2000
- Early Childhood 2001
- Leadership 2002
- Child Participation 2003
- Girls' Education and Development 2004
- Childhood Under Threat 2005

There are, therefore, specific themes which are deemed as central to UNICEF's role in improving the lives of children, young people and families and these establish a global discourse around childhood. Within individual countries there are deep impacts. The SOWC reports both set an agenda and report. Hence in any particular country specific priorities in relation to children and young people can be determined by the focus of UNICEF as it can have a direct influence through its many field officers and its funding of research and particular projects. This article will now explore one particular moment and product of UNICEF's global discourse and critically engage with UNICEF's own report dedicated to *participation*.

The State of the World's Children 2003 Report: Child Participation

This report (available in PDF format on the UNICEF web site) is broken into nine chapters, interspersed with eight panels. The chapters tackle specific questions and areas relating to participation but in a somewhat generic way. The panels illustrate (in some cases literally with photographs and drawings by children) more specific examples of children's

and young people's participation. The report is written in a highly accessible way, not least to make sure older children can engage with it. There are three maps that visually represent the results of the special poll conducted in 2001 in 72 countries (see above). Pages 81–119 provide nine tables which present the economic and social statistics on the countries and territories of the world which have a particular reference to children's well being. This article engages with selected elements within the narrative sections of the report, particularly in the chapters.

First, it is important to say something about the specific selection of this one report and the methodological approach used. The 2003 report is the one UNICEF report dedicated to the principle of participation. It is a report on various events that took place under the auspices of the UN in 2001 2002 and in which children's and young people's participation was an integrated part and which have been identified above. At the end of the General Assembly there was a pledge made to build 'a world fit for children' and world leaders stated a commitment to change the world *with* children's participation. Hence the 2003 report is the public statement by the UN of its own engagement with the practice of participation. In chapter 2 it asked the question—*Why participation, why now?* (the 'answers' to this question are discussed below) The fact that this particular report explicitly raises this question means that it is an important document which forms part of the global discourse about children's and young people's participation and hence is central to a critical review of such discourses.

Above I have stated that I used a critical discourse analysis of this particular publication. Discourse analysis aims to explore the outcomes of discourse in terms of actions, perceptions, or attitudes; to identify the regulatory frameworks within which groups of statements are produced, circulated and communicated; and to uncover the support mechanisms that uphold certain structures and rules over statements about people, events, places as unchallengeable, 'normal' or 'common-sense' (paraphrased from Waitt, 2005, pp. 164–5). Hence in this discourse analysis the aim is to examine the actions, perceptions and attitudes as they are presented by the UN about its own practices in relation to children's participation. By examining a 'global document' with a high level of circulation it is possible to say something about the regulatory framework within the report is both produced and the framework it functions to establish. There is also the opportunity to explore the ways in which the UN establishes the principle of certain types of children's participation as 'normal' and as 'common-sense'. Critically examining the discourse of the 2003 SOWC report means that it is possible to offer a critical commentary on the UN's practice in the field of participation and cast a vigilant gaze over a product that forms part of an 'accepted' global message.

Methodologically I drew upon Rose's (2001) and Waitt's (2005) strategies of how to approach discourse analysis. When I began working on this article it was the first time I had read a SOWC report hence it was easy for me to approach the text without any pre-existing categories and with an open mind. I read the text repeatedly—twice without making any notes or comments so that I could have a grasp of the text as a whole and understanding something about the different features of this 124-page text (as outlined above). On the third reading coding was carried out to identify any repeated or dominant themes; these were highlighted on the text and noted extensively and separately. The ways in which certain themes, language styles and images were used to persuade and convey a particular commentary were recorded as were any inconsistencies and contradictions within the report. Throughout the discourse analysis questions were asked about what was not present in the text and details which echoed or contradicted debates about childhood and participation were recorded.

The report is extremely rich and could not possible be reported in all the detail that was analysed. What I present here are *selected* thematics/concepts combined with a critical commentary upon, and questioning of, them. There is a great deal in this report that we can praise. I have been impressed with the ways in which UNICEF has taken specific action to ensure children's and young people's participation through its own projects and structures. Much of what is argued for here in the report I politically and intellectually would endorse and support. There are many echoes in this report of the 'new' conceptualisations of children discussed above as: social agents; deserving of rights; being competent at responsibilities; and important players in contemporary society. However, in view of the wide-reaching impact UNICEF and its discourse has in a global context, it is important to maintain a critical eye on the practice and engage with the possible hidden meanings, the 'regimes of truth', behind the rhetoric (Foucault, 1980; Skelton, 1999; Waitt, 2005).

Children as Hope/Children as Innocence: Problematic Representations?

The first page of the document is a foreword statement from Kofi Annan, secretary-general of the UN. He argues that the report is true to the spirit of the General Assembly Special Session on Children (2002). He states that the presence of children 'transformed the atmosphere of the United Nations' because the children 'introduced their passions, questions, fears, challenges, enthusiasm and optimism. They brought us their ideas, hopes and dreams'.

This notion of children as the holders of dreams and hopes is a recurrent trope through the report. While it is a positive representation of children there is also a possible sub-text which renders children as innocent, unsullied and unspoiled by the world at large (a reflection of previous discourses of children which have linked them to nature and of childhood as a state of innocence.) As Boyden (1990) notes this is very much a Northern/industrial nations' representation of childhood. It can smack of the preternatural child which wanders/wonders wide-eyed into the world with a fresh, but possibly, naive perspective. Such a discourse is made visible through the use of images. Fresh-faced, smiling, laughing, curious children (often photographed by other children, but selected for the report by adults) gaze out of the pages. The frank, honest and straightforward statements of children made at the special session for children or at a youth parliament meeting are writ large to demonstrate the directness of children's and young people's demands. There is a sense of children 'saying it as it is'. However, such statements can be defined as simplistic and devoid of the complexities of 'real life' which adults presume they understand so much better. The statements and the images are inspirational and moving—but is this a form of manipulation? Bombarded with images of children to invoke sympathy, concern, even pity, can we detach ourselves from the similar images used in reports about how young people should be participants in their own futures? The representation of children is also a highly problematic issue. Images of children can be read in so many different ways and they are a pervasive iconography of the global world. Is it possible that images of children might be used as a substitute for the presence, in an active, everyday way, of the children themselves?

A Concept of Participation: 'Authentic' Participation

On page 3 the report argues that 'children have always participated in life', and many have made significant differences in their life-worlds. Childhood as a social construct has been transformed and consequently children as a group are recognising that they have, and are being recognised as having, rights and social agency. The definition for participation is

taken from Roger Hart's essay *Children's Participation: from tokenism to citizenship* (1992, p. 5):

> The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured.

The emphasis is placed upon meaningful, genuine, authentic participation. Without caution children's participation can amount to manipulation, decoration or tokenism (SOWC, 2003, p. 5). Children's participation can often become more about the adults than about the young people. It can even be repressive, exploitative or abusive. UNICEF contrasts this with 'authentic participation' which

> must start from children and young people themselves, on their own terms, within their own realities and in pursuit of their own visions, dreams, hopes and concerns.[8] Children need information, support and favourable conditions in order to participate appropriately and in a way that enhances their dignity and self-esteem. (SOWC, 2003, p. 5).

The report later acknowledges that to bring about authentic participation for children demands a radical shift in adult thinking and behaviour. Adults have to recognise that they can no longer define the world on their terms only.

The problem with such notions of participation is that it is decontextualised. Apart from one sentence 'it also depends on the given sociocultural, economic and political context' (SOWC, 2003, p. 5) there is no other recognition that children have very different means through which they can (or cannot) express their hopes and dreams. It might be the case that that poorer children lack the social capital and education required to be able to even begin to articulate their wishes to themselves or their peers let alone to begin to participate alongside adults. As the UNESCO Growing up in Cities project has shown children from poor backgrounds do have a great deal to say that proves extremely useful *if* adults are willing to *ask* the questions and *listen* to the answers in ways that facilitate and encourage their participation (Chawla, 2002a). Hence there have to be appropriate settings, practices and approaches to ensure that all types of children can have their say. While UNICEF clearly does a great deal of work to try and rectify inequalities between children the deep impact poverty may have on children's (and adults') abilities to participate 'authentically' is not made explicit in the document. Chapter 5, *The Sharpest Edge*, does mention the ways in which adolescents and children face exploitation and abuse by adults. It is just three and a half pages long and the role of poverty is not made explicit.[9]

Hence, although there is a hegemonic discourse around children as social participants they are still found in marginal positions (Boyden and Holden, 1991; Dodman, 2004; Kjørholt, 2004). The focus on children as individuals is potentially important as part of debates about their rights but in poorer communities separating children from inter-generational networks in their communities can have disastrous consequences (Boyden, 1990). Such networks are often part of complex reciprocal relationships that are invaluable at times of crisis or insecurity, especially for individual families. Poverty impacts on many childhoods and is part of their lived context of the type and extent of their participation. Indeed in poor communities children may be vibrant participants whether through their involvement in paid work, labour within their family or even as a source of amusement and laughter for weary adults. Is this any the less 'authentic' because it does not take place in a public arena and is not about children identifying their own needs as somehow individualised and separate? The context of children's participation is often a

missing part of the discussion and consequently it is such contexts which require further research in order to identify the means to effective and meaningful participation.

The Theme of Democracy: Why Children 'Must' Participate

Chapter two of the report raises the question of why participation is important and why this should be now. It recognises the criticism which may be levelled against the call which is that many segments of the world's population are denied participation so is not including children just going too far? Children are dying in their thousands everyday so why is listening to their voices so important? The chapter then offers a range of 'because' explanations.

A key 'because' relates to democracy and this is a theme which emerges throughout the rest of the report. It is directly linked with development as a process. It is argued that democracy is important in the process of gaining international peace and development. Democracy has certain core values that include respect for, and the dignity of, all people.[10] These values, and the right to participate in order to secure such values, are best learned in childhood. In this sense 'participation is a keystone for cohesive societies, which, in turn, are the keystone for peace in the world' (SOWC, 2003, p. 10).

Later a sub-heading reiterates the linkage; *'Democracy begins with children'*. As world leaders are faced with greater and greater threats from terrorism, extreme poverty and people who feel increasingly disenfranchised they are turning to processes of 'deepening democracy'; a democracy which is more inclusive and responsive. To this end Member States of the UN pledged in the Millennium Declaration that they would 'spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for all internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development' (SOWC, 2003, pp. 11–12). Additionally there was a promise to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, and six of the eight are related to children. This links through to the Special Session on Children where governments committed to protect the rights of children and also safeguard their well being through other development processes.

The explicit link between democracy, children and development is then claimed (SOWC, 2003, p. 12) and, I would argue, established as a 'regime of truth'. If government, national agencies and other organisations do not vouchsafe children's rights and well being then the development goals will never be met. Poverty will remain and 'democracy will surely wither' (*ibid.*). This might be judged a tautology. If six of the eight Millennium goals relate to children, then, not to do what the goals list for children will automatically mean that they fail. However, the rhetoric serves its purpose. Children's rights, democracy and successful development have been firmly established as a dominant discourse.

The next subheading, *'The needs of democracy'*, then tells the story from a slightly different perspective. The disenchantment young people have towards democratic processes is identified as causing the greatest concern. However, rather than see this as a message of the problematic nature of contemporary democratic processes, UNICEF ploughs on with a commitment to democracy and a determination to get children involved. It would seem it is politic to listen to young people's voices only so far. When they are clearly critical of a particular practice/institution it is not about listening but more about getting them to participate in a system they have already expressed concern about. This is an inconsistency between the rhetoric and the practice of participation in relation to young people.

Having established that democracy needs young people to participate if it is to have a future, the final section of Chapter 2 is titled *'The hope for democracy'* (no doubt the term

'hope' is deliberate). The emphasis here is on the way in which democratic citizenship and understanding can be promoted. The best way, it is argued, is to begin such promotion in early childhood: 'the place to start to build democracy is with children—from what they learn in the process of their growth and development' (SOWC, 2003, p. 13).

This process of acquiring an understanding of 'democratic citizenship' is linked to participation. Children who are encouraged to participate in their families, schools, communities and societies are described as being more self-confident, more aware of what is happening around them and better behaved and respectful.

Hence a new generation of caring, responsible, aware and hard working citizens are to be developed. However, isn't this also about conformity, duty, and an acceptance of the status quo with perhaps some limited expectation of change, a replication of the values of adults? There is little room in this model of citizenship for creativity, disruption, rebellion or resist- ance.[11] Can young people and children genuinely gain from participating in a system, a process, a model for development, that previously has consistently marginalised them?

Citizens of the Future? Beings of the Now?

The concept of democratic citizenship has been considered above. What I want to do in this final section of this paper is consider the ways in which the UNICEF report's represen- tation of citizenship connects with the somewhat contradictory construction of children as 'becoming' or as 'being'.

In the first chapter '*Children must be heard*' there is a direct engagement with the anxiety adults express about children's participation undermining adult authority within the family and society (SOWC, 2003, p. 4). UNICEF counters that '[t]he social give and take of participation encourages children to assume increasing responsibilities as active, tolerant and democratic citizens *in formation*' (*ibid.:* my emphasis). This means that children are understood to be in the state of 'becoming'.[12] They have a future ahead of them and participation is a means to enable that future to be positive for them as they grow/develop into the 'right kind' of citizens.

The 'becoming' element of childhood is reiterated in two of the five 'because' reasons for children's participation in chapter 2 (SOWC, 2003, p. 9). '*Because* promoting mean- ingful and quality participation of children and adolescents is essential in ensuring their growth and development' [emphasis in original]. Another 'because' states that 'authentic and meaningful participation prepares children for their stake in the future'. In each case children are assumed to be in process, to be 'becoming' something else (something better, something more valuable?).[13]

Interestingly, within the same report are direct quotes from young people and children who were present and spoke at the major meetings organised and discussed above. These quotes by the children themselves firmly establish their sense of self as 'beings'. These are three particularly clear examples:

> 'In 1990 our countries signed the CRC but they have done next to nothing to realize it', said a 17-year-old delegate, his body shaking as he spoke, though out of sheer passion rather than nerves. 'We agree with your promises but *now* you have to show you mean it. I am talking from the heart—you must do the same'. (pp. 61, my emphasis)

> We the children are experts on *being* 8, 12 or 17 years old in the societies of today ... To consult us would make your work more effective and give better results for the children. My proposal is that you make us part of your team. (Heidi Grande, 17, a Norwegian delegate to the Special Session on Children, SOWC, 2003, p. 65, my emphasis)

We are the children of the world, and despite our different backgrounds, we share a common reality. We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place for all. *You call us the future, but we are also the present*. (Final section of the statement presented to world leaders at the UN Special Session on Children, formulated between 400 young people at the Children's Forum, SWC, 2003, p. 66, my emphasis)

What is transparent from these three quotations direct from children and young people themselves is that they see themselves as *beings* in the here and now. They want action for them as they are now; they are keen to see change in their present times of 'being' rather than in their future times into which they are 'becoming'.

If the SOWC predominant discourse is that of children as 'becomings' what does this tell us about their perception of children and young people. It apparently indicates that the pervasive perspective of children as 'adults in waiting' is still very predominant even in UN discourses about children. UNICEF, in its own report about participation, in places represents such participation as *preparation* for future behaviour in adulthood. This 'slip' of conceptualisation is a classic example of the need for critical examination of the 'taken-for-granted' assumption within the text. If UNICEF, within its own report on participation, cannot effectively engage with the children as beings with rights in the here and now, then what hope is there of beleaguered and impoverished governments, communities and families doing the same? UNICEF has to set a meaningful example.

Conclusions

There is a great deal of positive discourse in The State of the World's Children 2003 relating to the importance of authentic participation by children and young people. Examples are cited where individual children have made a significant intervention through their participation.

Nevertheless, there are facets of the document and its rhetoric which we have to critique. Such is the global reach of UNICEF's discourse that the vigilance of 'critical friends' is essential. Why are children and young people the holders of hopes and dreams? Is not this an indication that adults have to work harder at keeping in touch with, and striving for, their own hopes and dreams? Indeed, for many adults the hopes and dreams of a better future for their children and grandchildren is what keeps them striving against the odds. What about the children in such levels of despair that they have learned the futility of having hopes and dreams? How can these children begin the difficult path towards participation? Many of them are already participating in adult worlds (war, trafficking, prostitution) which have abused, exploited and damaged them. Where are the participation strategies for such children? Can 'authentic participation' reach children and young people who lack cultural capital, education, supportive homes and families? In the context of the specific report, what is not clear is whether the children feel their participation was taken seriously, whether they felt they were listened to at the 2002 meetings. Projects like the UNESCO 'Growing up in Cities' in conjunction with the MOST Programme and the work of Childwatch International (Auriat *et al.*, 2001) seem to indicate that it is possible. However, this is about reaching children and young people in cities. While the world is urbanising at a rapid rate (Boyden and Holden, 1991) there are millions of children in rural areas and in small island developing states. A more recent UNESCO programme, Small Island Voice, has a specific remit to promote and support children's and young people's participation through youth forums and other activities.

I remain concerned about the maintenance of a model of democracy which has already disenchanted and disenfranchised children and young people. Why cannot their

encouraged participation be aimed at transformation rather than at confirmation of the established patterns? Is something of the vitality and creativity of children and young people lost when they participate in adult structures? If pre-existing models have marginalized children then unless there is fundamental change within the institutional structures children's participation will appear as tokenism, no matter how often this accusation is denied. Just as men were, and are, reluctant to give up their established forms of political (and other types) of power to allow women to play a meaningful role, so adults will resist the loss of authority and power that a child-centred, young person-friendly model of democracy will require. Change can be wrought and children and young people can grasp power (with adult support and advocacy) but it will be a long, long struggle. UNICEF, of all international organisations, should be the one to lead the way.

The young people and children involved in the Children's Forum and the UN Special Session raised their voices about a wide range of things. However, one of the most significant challenges was to encourage and demand that adults recognise children and young people as 'being' as opposed to always 'becoming'. A demand which is about recognition of the self and with that the confidence to demand rights and accept responsibilities in the here and now. It connects with new social studies of childhood and development discourses and practices of participation. However, it is important that UNICEF and other practitioners in development see children in their wider contexts. It is important that children are not seen as being so competent that we excuse ourselves as adults from the responsibility of caring for them. They *do* need protection and they *do* need provision. Just because some children participate and demonstrate social agency does not mean that they don't need looking after. We cannot ignore that the fact that the majority of the world's children/children of the majority world are in vulnerable positions which are *not* of their making. They are of adults' making, and frequently distant adults who fail or refuse to see the consequences of their actions.

Participation is an important part of children's rights. The CRC has created the space for a significant shift in thinking about, and working with, children. What is required now is an understanding from children's perspectives as to what they envisage as effective and meaningful participation and a thorough evaluation of what such participation might mean for those involved. Children's participation is firmly on the agenda but its practice has a long way to go.

There is evidence of such evaluations. A decade on from the launch of the CRC an international symposium on *Children's Participation in Community Settings'* was held in Oslo, Norway (June 2000). The emphasis was on best practice within programmes that provided children and young people with an authentic and effective voice as part of working towards an improvement in the life conditions, and this was enacted through the Growing Up in Cities project (Auriat *et al.*, 2001; Chawla, 2002a).

In my final section of participation in this debate I raise a very large question which I am not yet able to answer. It is a question triggered by three aspects; one is Boyden's (1990) criticism of the exclusion of voices from the South in the formulation of the CRC; a second is the critical analysis of the UNICEF report on children and participation outlined above; and the third reflects the fact the majority of the world's children live and die in so-called 'developing countries'. In consideration of these three aspects should the CRC be reviewed? Should an alternative Convention be written from the perspective of children, young people and their adult advocates of the majority world? If we are to genuinely challenge Northern/minority world hegemonic discourses around some of the most important people on the planet then my answer to both these questions is 'yes' and with a great deal of effort it could be a genuine and authentic process of participation.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The ubiquity and pervasiveness of this definition became very apparent during a training session I organised as part of a Flinders University/AusAid gender mainstreaming programme in December 2005. The participants were all local government workers or NGO practitioners from different parts of Indonesia. I was presenting a final session at the end of a three-month programme which had focused on gender but not on children and young people in development. As part of the first stage of the session I asked them to define the term 'child'. I had expected different interpretations of the term, not least because of the variety of cultural and geographical backgrounds the participants represented. Also I was aware that few of them worked with children in their capacities as development workers. *All* 20 participants (in their groups of four or five) stated simply that a child was someone under 18.
2. The term 'the child' has been problematised here because it can objectify and universalise all children. Prout and James (1990) discuss the way in which Piaget used the term 'the child' as 'the bodily manifestation of cognitive development from infancy to adulthood [which] can represent all children' (pp. 12, my insertion).
3. Readers who are familiar with debates about gender and development will notice an echoing of the rhetoric defining the need for women's rights, autonomy, empowerment and participation within development.
4. However, geographers were not the initiators of this shift in conceptualisation of childhood within the social sciences. As Aitken states: 'Until very recently . . . geographers worked within commonly held assumptions about children, often without attending to the moral, cultural and political contexts of those assumptions' (2001, p. 27). Children's geographies is now, however, an important part of the 'new social studies of childhood'.
5. Once again the parallel debates with women's status within development are echoed here, in some quarters women are no longer seen as passive recipients of development but as social actors in their own right. However, a persistent view of their dependency on men remains strong.
6. This term is used in the State of the World's Children 2003 document and also defined in specific detail. It is something I return to later in the paper.
7. UNICEF's formalised discourse has progressively (but not completely) shifted from 'to children' to that of 'with children'.
8. There are those hopes and dreams again!
9. It is important to recognise that I am analysing just one Sate of the World's Children report. The 2005 report is titled 'Childhood Under Threat' which has a very strong emphasis on the impact of poverty on children. There are also repeated references to the importance of adults in children's lives.
10. This statement makes Jo Boyden's work on the 'globalization of childhood' all the more disturbing. Writing at a time pre-dating the CRC, Boyden argues that 'in recent consultations on the content of the draft of the Convention of the Rights of the Child . . . several delegates from the South expressed dissatisfaction that the drafting group was "predominantly Western in its orientation" and argued that greater account should have been taken "of the cultural diversity and economic realities of developing countries"' (1990, p. 198). The values of a so called 'normal' childhood were foreign concepts to them. With this insight we can see that the CRC is far from the democratic document the SOWC 2003 report presumes.
11. To be fair to UNICEF there is one specific mention of resistance in this 2003 report. It appears on page 17 and is the final 'reality' listing in Panel 2 *Child participation: myth and reality*. The report acknowledges that resistance can be an important part of participation and that it should be recognised as a form of communication and responded to through dialogue and negotiation not through force or persuasion.

12. Prout and James (1990, p. 11) have argued that within a Piagetian conceptualisation of children they are 'marginalized beings awaiting temporal passage, through the acquisition of cognitive skill, into the world of adults'. This is a problematic conceptualisation and connects with representations of children as passive, unable to articulate anything expect their own needs and desires.

13. This construction of children as 'becoming' resonates with youth studies work on transitions. For a more detailed critique of the 'youth transitions' concept and literature see Skelton (2002).

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